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U.S. says China balloon could collect intelligence signals

By **MATTHEW LEE**
and **ERIC TUCKER**
Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The China balloon shot down by the U.S. was equipped to detect and collect intelligence signals as part of a huge, military-linked aerial surveillance program that targeted more than 40 countries, the Biden administration declared Thursday, citing imagery from American U-2 spy planes. A fleet of balloons operates under the direction of the People's Liberation Army and is used specifically for spying, outfitted with high-tech equipment designed to gather sensitive information from targets across the globe, the U.S. said. Similar balloons have sailed over five continents, according to the administration.



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Lawmakers and intelligence advisers, including Gen. Glen VanHerck, left, commander of the United States Northern Command and North American Aerospace Defense Command, arrive for a closed briefing on the Chinese surveillance balloon that flew over the United States recently, at the Capitol in Washington, Thursday, Feb. 9, 2023.

Associated Press

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U.S. says China balloon could collect intelligence signals



In this image provided by the FBI, FBI special agents assigned to the evidence response team process material recovered from the high altitude balloon recovered off the coast of South Carolina, Thursday, Feb. 9, 2023, at the FBI laboratory in Quantico, Va.

Associated Press

Continued from Front

A statement from a senior State Department official offered the most detail to date linking China's military to the balloon that was shot down by the U.S. last weekend over the Atlantic Ocean. The public details outlining the program's scope and capabilities were meant to refute China's persistent denials that the balloon was used for spying, including a claim Thursday that U.S. accusations about the balloon amount to "information warfare."

On Capitol Hill, the House voted unanimously to condemn China for a "brazen violation" of U.S. sovereignty and efforts to "deceive the international community through false claims about its intelligence collection campaigns." Republicans have criticized President Joe Biden for not acting sooner to down the balloon, but both parties' lawmakers came together on the vote, 419-0.

In Beijing, before the U.S. offered its new information, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Mao Ning repeated her nation's insistence that the large unmanned balloon was a civilian meteorologi-

cal airship that had blown off course and that the U.S. had "overreacted" by shooting it down.

"It is irresponsible," Mao said. The latest accusations, she said, "may be part of the U.S. side's information warfare against China."

Underscoring the tensions, China's defense minister refused to take a phone call from Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin to discuss the balloon issue on Saturday, the Pentagon said. Secretary of State Antony Blinken canceled a planned weekend trip to Beijing. The U.S. flatly contradicted China's version of events, saying that imagery of the balloon collected by American U-2 spy planes as it crossed the country showed that it was "capable of conducting signals intelligence collection" with multiple antennas and other equipment designed to upload sensitive information and solar panels to power them.

Jedidiah Royal, the U.S. assistant defense secretary for the Indo-Pacific, told a Senate Appropriations subcommittee that the military has "some very good guesses" about what intelligence China was seeking. More information was expected to be provided in a classified setting.

Senior FBI officials who briefed reporters on the condition of anonymity under ground rules set by the bureau said just a few pieces of the balloon had arrived at the FBI's Quantico, Virginia, lab for investigation. So far, investigators have parts of the balloon canopy, wiring, and what one official called "a very small amount of electronics." The official said it was "very early for us to assess what the intent was and how the device was operating."

According to two U.S. officials, the balloon recovery efforts were temporarily suspended on Thursday due to high seas. They said some balloon debris was intact on the ocean floor and divers had recovered potentially high-value equipment over the past day and a half.

Much of the debris is concentrated in two separate sections of an area that's 15 football fields long and 15 football fields across, according to the officials who spoke on condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of the collection process.

The State Department official, providing details to reporters by email, also on condition of anonym-

ity, said an analysis of the balloon debris was "inconsistent" with China's explanation that it was a weather balloon that went off course. The U.S. is reaching out to countries that have also been targeted, the official said, to discuss the scope of the Chinese surveillance program, and is looking into potential action that "supported the balloon's incursion into U.S. airspace."

The official said the U.S. has confidence that the manufacturer of the balloon shot down on Saturday has "a direct relationship with China's military and is an approved vendor of the" army. The official cited information from an official PLA procurement portal as evidence for the connection between the company and the military.

The release of new information appeared part of a coordinated administration response, with multiple officials appearing before congressional committees to face questions about the balloon.

Testifying before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman said officials had taken "all necessary steps to protect sensitive information" and had

been able to study and scrutinize the balloon and its equipment.

"We will continue to answer the dangers posed by the PRC with determination and resolve," Sherman said, referring to the People's Republic of China. "We will make clear to the PRC that violations of our sovereignty and the sovereignty of other countries are unacceptable."

At a separate Senate subcommittee hearing, lawmakers repeatedly pressed administration officials, including Pentagon military leaders, about why the balloon was not shot down over sparsely populated areas of Alaska. And they questioned whether allowing the balloon to transit such a large area set a precedent for future spying efforts by China and others.

"It defies belief that there was not a single opportunity to safely shoot this spy balloon prior to the coast of South Carolina," said Sen. Susan Collins, R-Maine. "By the administration's logic we would allow the Chinese to fly surveillance balloons over the Pentagon or other sensitive sites and populated areas."

Melissa Dalton, assistant defense secretary of Homeland Defense, and Lt. Gen. Doug Sims, director of operations for the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said the U.S. wanted to avoid any injuries or deaths from the debris field if the balloon was shot down over Alaska.

And they added that shooting it down over the frigid, icy waters in that region would have made it more difficult and dangerous to recover the pieces for more analysis.

"We thought before we shot," said Sims. This is not the first time the U.S. government has publicly called out alleged activities of the People's Liberation Army. In a first-of-its-kind prosecution in 2014, the Obama administration Justice Department indicted five accused PLA hackers of breaking into the computer networks of major American corporations in an effort to steal trade secrets. □

Supreme Court might have easy outs on elections, immigration

By MARK SHERMAN and JESSICA GRESKO
Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Supreme Court soon could find itself with easy ways out of two high-profile cases involving immigration and elections, if indeed the justices are looking to avoid potentially messy, divisive decisions.

Off-ramps in those cases could prove attractive in a term with no shortage of big cases that could divide the court's six conservatives and three liberals. Affirmative action, voting rights, gay rights and student loan forgiveness also are on the agenda for a court that is less than a year removed from overturning nearly 50 years of constitutional protections for abortion and seeing a significant dip in public confidence. The Biden administration provided one possible way out for the court this week.

A legal fight over turning away immigrants at the border because of the coronavirus pandemic, under a provision of federal law known as Title 42, is about to become irrelevant, the administration said in a court filing Tuesday.



An electronic sign flashes "Watch for unexpected pedestrians," Dec. 20, 2022, on the highway next to the fenced U.S.-Mexican border just east of downtown El Paso, Texas, next to one of the three bridges that connect the Texas city with the sprawling metropolis of Juarez, Mexico.

Associated Press

day. That's because the administration recently announced that the public health emergency that justified the quick expulsion of immigrants will expire on May 11.

"Absent other relevant developments, the end of the public health emergency will (among other consequences) terminate the

Title 42 orders and moot this case," wrote the administration's top Supreme Court lawyer, Solicitor General Elizabeth Prelogar.

The use of Title 42 began during Donald Trump's presidency and continued after Joe Biden took office. It has been used millions of times to quickly turn away migrants at the border.

Title 42 is at the root of a Su-

preme Court case that the justices in December put on a fast track, with arguments set for March 1.

At issue isn't the use of Title 42 itself but the question of whether a group of Republican states can insert themselves into a lawsuit over the policy. The states support keeping it in place. If it ends, they say illegal immigration will increase and

they argue their interests aren't represented in the case.

The court could still rule before May 11, though that would be faster than usual. It's also possible the policy's end date will be pushed back beyond that date. But if the public health emergency ends as planned and the justices do nothing until then, the case could end without a decision.

When the court agreed to take the case in December, the justices were split. Five justices wanted to wade in and four justices the court's three liberals and conservative Neil Gorsuch said they would not have gotten involved in the first place.

The other case the court could dodge involves a closely watched elections issue and comes out of North Carolina. Last week the state's top court ordered a new look at the case.

Republicans in North Carolina have asked the justices for a ruling that could leave state legislatures virtually unchecked in making rules for congressional and presidential elections. □

U.S., U.K. impose cybersecurity sanctions on Russian group

By FATIMA HUSSEIN
Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The U.S. Treasury Department on Thursday announced a joint U.S.-U.K. effort to sanction Russian cybercriminals as the one-year anniversary of Russia's invasion of Ukraine nears and Treasury tightens its efforts to financially punish violators of existing sanctions.

The U.S. coordinated with the United Kingdom to impose sanctions on seven people that it said are part of the Russia-based cybercrime gang Trickbot. All members are listed as living in Russia or Russian-occupied Ukraine.

Trickbot is named for a strain of trojan viruses originally used to steal financial data. The viruses have in-

fecting millions of computers worldwide, including ransomware attacks that targeted hospitals in the United States at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, U.K. officials said.

In a statement, Treasury said the sanctioned men included developers, money-launderers and a senior figure, Vitaly Kovalev, who it said was indicted in federal court in New Jersey in connection with 2009 and 2010 bank hacks that predated his involvement with the Trickbot Group.

The U.S. statement said current members of the Trickbot Group are associated with Russian intelligence services but did not allege the sanctioned men worked with those services. Calling the actions "histor-

ic," Treasury says these are the first sanctions of their kind for the U.K., and result from a partnership between the U.S. Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control and several U.K. agencies aimed at disrupting Russian cybercrime.

In a separate Treasury action, nine entities across Iran, Malaysia and Singapore were sanctioned on Thursday for their role in shipping sanctioned Iranian oil to buyers in Asia continuing a trend of punishing firms that ship Iranian oil.

Six Iran-based petrochemical manufacturers and subsidiaries, and three firms in Malaysia and Singapore involved in facilitating the sale and shipment of oil, were hit with blocks to the

U.S. financial system. Sanctions were imposed last July and September on a group of firms tied to the sale and shipment of Iranian petroleum and petrochemical products to East Asia. U.S.

sanctions on Iran have accelerated in recent months, as President Joe Biden's administration tries to bring Tehran back to negotiations for a return to the 2015 Iran nuclear deal. □



The Treasury Department is seen near sunset in Washington, Jan. 18, 2023.

Associated Press

House votes to overturn D.C. criminal code and voting laws

By **ASHRAF KHALIL**

Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Republican-led House has launched the first salvo in what could be a long-running feud with the District of Columbia over self-government in the nation's capital.

In back-to-back votes, the House voted Thursday to overturn a sweeping rewrite of the criminal code passed by the City Council last year and a new law that would grant noncitizens the right to vote in local elections.

Congressional oversight of the district is written into the Constitution. And while it has been more than three decades since Congress outright nullified a D.C. law, Congress has frequently used alternative methods such as budget riders to alter laws on issues ranging from abortion funding to marijuana legalization.

The House voted 250-173 to overturn the rewrite of the criminal code, which among other things, reduced the maximum penalties for burglary, carjacking and robbery. The voting rights bill also was overturned by a 260-173 vote.

The moves may be partially symbolic since both would have to pass the Democratic-held Senate



District of Columbia Mayor Muriel Bowser speaks during a news conference about the arrest of suspect in a recent string of attacks on homeless people, March 15, 2022, in Washington.

Associated Press

and be signed by President Joe Biden. However, both House votes garnered a notable amount of Democratic support with 31 Democrats voting to overturn the criminal code rewrite and 42 voting to overturn the voting measure. Biden has said publicly that he opposes both measures, but has not explicitly stated he would veto them.

Thursday's votes signal a new and openly combative phase in the District's tortured relationship with

the federal government. The debate has put D.C. Mayor Muriel Bowser in a curious political position. Bowser vetoed the rewrite of the city's criminal code in January, saying the maximum penalty reductions send "the wrong message" on crime prevention, Bowser also apposed a measure that would allow for jury trials in most misdemeanor cases, saying the sudden spike in jury trials would overwhelm the local justice system. Her veto was quick-

ly overridden by the D.C. Council in a 12-1 vote. Republican lawmakers decried the D.C. government as soft on criminals in the midst of a multi-year local spike in violent crime. Several Republican lawmakers have cited Bowser's opposition to bolster their own arguments.

But Bowser has publicly stated she does not want Congress to get involved in the process, while also citing congressional concern as proof of the validity of

her own objections.

"We don't want any interference on our local laws," she said last week.

"Quite frankly, members of Congress have expressed similar concerns. There's a lot of people that don't agree with what the council did."

New York Rep. Anthony Esposito, a former police officer, accused the D.C. Council of "empowering criminals at the expense of the public," and said the new criminal code would "effectively prevent the local justice system from keeping criminals off of our streets, all while D.C. grapples with a crime wave."

Rep. Jamie Raskin, D-Md., the top Democrat on the House Committee on Oversight and Accountability, and Rep. Eleanor Holmes Norton, D.C.'s nonvoting delegate in the Congress, spent most of the morning House debate playing defense. Norton said the new mandatory minimum penalties would still be higher than those for identical crimes in multiple U.S. states.

Raskin accused House Republicans of ignoring their own public dedication to states' rights by carrying out a longstanding vendetta against the D.C. government. □

Tiny California mouse wins Guinness award for longevity

SAN DIEGO (AP) — A tiny California mouse now has a big title after winning a Guinness World record for longevity.

A Pacific pocket mouse named Pat — after "Star Trek" actor Patrick Stewart — received the Guinness approval Wednesday as the oldest living mouse in human care at the ripe age of 9 years and 209 days, the San Diego Zoo Wildlife Alliance announced after a certification ceremony.

Pat was born at the at the San Diego Zoo Safari Park on July 14, 2013, under a conservation breeding program, the alliance said. The Pacific pocket mouse,

which weighs as much as three pennies, is the smallest mouse species in North

America and gets its name from cheek pouches the animals use to carry food

and nesting materials, the wildlife alliance said.

The mouse once had a range stretching from Los Angeles south to the Tijuana River Valley but the population plunged after 1932 because of human encroachment and habitat destruction, the alliance said. The mouse was thought to be extinct for 20 years until tiny, isolated populations were rediscovered in 1994 in Dana Point in Orange County but the species remains endangered, the alliance said.

In 2012, the alliance began a breeding program to help save the mouse from extinction. Last year, the al-

liance recorded 117 pups born in a record 31 litters. Many of the mice will be re-introduced to the wild this spring, the alliance said.

A new population of Pacific pocket mice was established in Orange County's Laguna Coast Wilderness Park and the mice began breeding without human assistance in 2017, the alliance said. Though it doesn't receive the publicity of larger and more charismatic species, the Pacific pocket mouse is critical to its ecosystem because the mice disperse the seeds of native plants and their digging encourages plant growth, the alliance said. □



This Jan. 10, 2023, photo provided by the San Diego Zoo Wildlife Alliance shows a Pacific pocket mouse named Sir Patrick Stewart.

Associated Press

Russian diplomat says ties with U.S. in 'unprecedented crisis'

By VLADIMIR ISACHENKOV
Associated Press

MOSCOW (AP) — Russia-U.S. relations are in a state of "unprecedented crisis" without any sign of improvement, a senior Russian diplomat said Thursday. Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov argued that the White House's emphasis on increasing weapons supplies to Ukraine to ensure Russia's defeat leaves no room for diplomacy. "I don't see any prospect for a productive political and diplomatic process," Ryabkov said at a briefing. "We have a very deep and unprecedented crisis in Russia-U.S. relations. The Biden administration has driven them into a deadlock."

Ryabkov warned that the U.S. and its allies must carefully assess the risks stemming from supplying increasingly powerful Western weapons to Ukraine. "The Americans need to thoroughly and deeply weigh the risks linked to their unabashedly cavalier course," he said. Ryabkov noted that Moscow doesn't trust Western statements about self-imposed restrictions on a



Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov attends a meeting in Moscow, Russia, Tuesday, March 15, 2022.

range of weapons supplied to Ukraine in order to avoid escalation, adding that such assurances in the past have served as cover for a steady expansion of the assortment of arms deliveries. "We don't see any sign of reason in any of the NATO and EU members' capitals," Ryabkov said. "What they are doing isn't going to strengthen their security." He rejected the U.S. ar-

gument that Russia's refusal to allow the resumption of inspections of its nuclear facilities represents a breach of the New START treaty, the last remaining nuclear arms control pact between the two countries. The New START treaty, signed in 2010 by President Barack Obama and Russian President Dmitry Medvedev, limits each country to no more than 1,550 de-

ployed nuclear warheads and 700 deployed missiles and bombers. The agreement envisages sweeping on-site inspections to verify compliance. Just days before the treaty was due to expire in February 2021, Russia and the United States agreed to extend it for another five years. Russia and the U.S. have suspended mutual inspections under New

START since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, but Moscow last fall refused to allow their resumption, raising uncertainty about the pact's future. Russia also indefinitely postponed a planned round of consultations under the treaty. The U.S. State Department last week said that Russia's refusal to allow the inspections "prevents the United States from exercising important rights under the treaty and threatens the viability of U.S.-Russian nuclear arms control." It noted that nothing prevents Russian inspectors from conducting inspections of the U.S. facilities. Ryabkov on Thursday insisted that Russia has continued to comply with the treaty and exchange information in accordance with it. Ryabkov's comments followed a Russian Foreign Ministry's statement declaring that it was impossible to maintain "business as usual" with Washington at a time when "the U.S. has effectively unleashed a total hybrid war against Russia, which is fraught with a real danger of a direct military confrontation between the two nuclear powers." □

Associated Press

Church of England allows blessings for same-sex couples

By DANICA KIRKA
Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — The Church of England's national assembly on Thursday voted to let priests bless same-sex marriages and civil partnerships, while continuing to ban church weddings for the same couples. Bishops proposed the compromise measure after five years of discussions about the church's position on sexuality. It was approved by the church's General Synod, which is made up of bishops, clergy and lay people from around the country, following eight hours of debate over two days at a meeting in London. The measure included an apology for the church's failure welcome LGBTQ people. But it also

endorsed the doctrine that marriage is between one man and one woman, meaning priests are still barred from marrying same-sex couples. "I know that what we have proposed as a way forward does not go nearly far enough for many but too far for others," the Bishop of London, Sarah Mullally, said in a statement. "It is my prayer that what has been agreed today will represent a step forward for all of us within the Church including LGBTQI+ people as we remain committed to walking together." Jayne Ozanne, a gay rights campaigner and member of the synod, said she was "deeply disappointed" that conservatives had stifled the church's debate

on sexuality. The synod earlier this week rejected an amendment proposed by Ozanne that would have put the issue of marriage equality back on the agenda later this year. "By continuing to tell LGB people that they cannot hope to get married any time soon in their church or that their desire for sexual intimacy is sinful, we send a message to the nation that few will understand," Ozanne said on Twitter. "More importantly, it is a message that will continue to cause great harm to the LGBT community and put young LGBT+ lives at risk." Same-sex marriage has been legal in England and Wales since 2013, but the church didn't alter its teaching on marriage

when the law changed. Public opinion surveys consistently show that a majority of people in England support same-sex mar-

riage. But the Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, said the church continues to have "deep divisions" on the issue. □



The Archbishop of York, Stephen Cottrell, left and The Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, gather at the General Synod of the Church of England, at Church House to consider a motion which reviews the church's failure "to be welcoming to LGBTQI+ people" and the harm they have faced and still experience, in London, Thursday, Feb. 9, 2023.

Associated Press

Nicaragua frees 222 opponents of Ortega, sends them to U.S.

By **GABRIELA SELSER and AAMER MADHANI**
Associated Press

MEXICO CITY (AP) — Some 222 inmates considered by many to be political prisoners of the government of Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega flew to Washington on Thursday, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken said. Blinken said the prisoners had been jailed “for exercising their fundamental freedoms and have endured lengthy unjust detentions.”

“The release of these individuals, one of whom is a U.S. citizen, by the government of Nicaragua marks a constructive step towards addressing human rights abuses in the country and opens the door to further dialogue between the United States and Nicaragua regarding issues of concern,” Blinken said.

He said that among those on the plane were political and business leaders, journalists, civil society representatives and students. Blinken credited “concerted American diplomacy.” A senior Biden administration official, speaking on condition of anonymity, had said earlier that the government of Nicaragua decided “unilaterally” to



Police stand guard at a holding center known as “El Chipote,” officially called the Judicial Assistance Directorate, as they face demonstrators, on the other side of the fence, protesting the arrests of anti-government protesters in Managua, Nicaragua, April 25, 2018.

Associated Press

release them.

Ortega has maintained that his imprisoned opponents and others were behind 2018 street protests that he claims were a plot to overthrow him. Tens of thousands have fled into exile since Nicaraguan security forces violently put down those antigovernment protests.

The Nicaraguan opposition’s latest count on “political prisoners” held had been 245. It was not immediately clear who was not

released.

The U.S. official said the freed prisoners will be paroled for humanitarian reasons into the United States for a period of two years. The official said all of those who left Nicaragua did so voluntarily and are to receive medical and legal assistance upon arrival in the U.S.

A Nicaraguan judge read a statement saying the 222 prisoners had been “deported.”

Octavio Roths Schuh, a mag-

istrate on the Managua Appeals court, said the deportation was carried out under an order issued Wednesday that declared the prisoners “traitors to the country.” He said they were deported for actions that undermined Nicaragua’s independence and sovereignty.

Later Thursday, Nicaragua’s Congress unanimously approved a constitutional change allowing “traitors” to be stripped of their nationality. It will re-

quire a second vote in the next legislative session later this year.

Wilma Nuñez, president of the Nicaragua Center for Human Rights, said in a statement that while the prisoners’ release was welcome, “deportation is a legal term that applies to foreigners who commit crimes in a country.”

Arturo McFields, Nicaragua’s former ambassador to the Organization of American States, celebrated the release, which he said the U.S. State Department had confirmed to him. “It is a massive freeing” of prisoners seldom seen, McFields said. He credited the prisoners’ families for never letting up the pressure. Other one-time presidential hopefuls Arturo Cruz and Juan Sebastian Chamorro were also on the flight, U.S. officials said.

Ortega upped his pursuit of political opponents in early 2021, looking to clear the field ahead of presidential elections in November of that year. Security forces arrested seven potential presidential contenders and Ortega romped to a fourth consecutive term in elections that the U.S. and other countries termed a farce. □

Australian Defense Department to remove Chinese-made cameras

By **ROD MCGUIRK**

Associated Press

CANBERRA, Australia (AP)

— Australia’s Defense Department will remove surveillance cameras made by Chinese Communist Party-linked companies from its buildings, the government said Thursday after the U.S. and Britain made similar moves.

The Australian newspaper reported Thursday that at least 913 cameras, intercoms, electronic entry systems and video recorders developed and manufactured by Chinese companies Hikvision and Dahua are in Australian government and agency offices, including the Defense Department and the Depart-

ment of Foreign Affairs and Trade. Hikvision and Dahua are partly owned by China’s Communist Party-ruled government.

Australian Defense Minister Richard Marles said his department is assessing all its surveillance technology.

“Where those particular

cameras are found, they’re going to be removed,” Marles told Australian Broadcasting Corp. “There is an issue here and we’re going to deal with it.”

Asked about Australia’s decision, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Mao Ning criticized what she called “wrongful practices that overstretch the concept of national security and abuse state power to suppress and discriminate against Chinese enterprises.”

Without mentioning Australia by name, Mao said the Chinese government has “always encouraged Chinese enterprises to carry out foreign investment and cooperation in accor-

dance with market principles and international rules, and on the basis of compliance with local laws.”

“We hope Australia will provide a fair and non-discriminatory environment for the normal operation of Chinese enterprises and do more things that are conducive to mutual trust and cooperation between the two sides,” she told reporters at a daily briefing.

The U.S. government said in November it was banning telecommunications and video surveillance equipment from several prominent Chinese brands including Hikvision and Dahua in an effort to protect the nation’s communications network. □



This shows a Chinese Dahua brand security camera in Sydney, Australia, Thursday, Feb. 9, 2023.

Associated Press

Labor union STA signs collective contract for Tierra del Sol employees



(Oranjestad)—Yesterday Morning, the labor union 'Sindicato di Trahadornan di Aruba' (STA) held a press conference to inform the public that after a few years of delays, they have signed a labor contract (CAO) with the goal of creating labor peace to the employees at Tierra del Sol.

The process for signing this contract was one that took a long time to complete. The pandemic had been the first bump that caused a delay in this process, as this made the financial situation on Aruba difficult. However, there were happy to see that not one employee lost their job: "we

had to tighten our resources, and Tierra del Sol did not have the financial support for the union's requirements, which the workers were asking for," Diego de Cuba, president of the union, expressed.

He also explained that they saw a recovery after the pandemic, but once they were ready to finally sign, they were met with another obstacle. They learned that the company was sold to a Spanish group, "but every cloud has a silver lining, the collective contract will be signed today. This is a well-balanced contract, and has most of the important ingredients for a good la-

bor contract," he assured. This contract is valid for 3 years, so they can keep the peace in the years to come. What they managed to include in the contract is very good, "if we make a calculation with everything together, the conditions will improve for those workers with approximately 15%, which is an average of approximately 5% per year if we look at everything that will be improved. Their salary will increase, paid off days will improve, savings fund, end of year bonus and vacation money. So, if we take a look at everything together, this contract is indeed pretty good," de Cuba pointed

out.

As a union, they knew they could have applied more pressure on the company, but seeing as the company will be handed over to another owner, a big investment has to be made for the golf course. This area deteriorated over the years due to lack of a team and materials for maintenance.

"We have expressed our understanding about this to the new owners. However, we also expect them to understand that the workers have waited a very long time, and have even sacrificed to maintain whatever they could with what little they had. I have to say that thankfully the new owners were very empathetic, and we were able to sign with them," de Cuba expressed. They also hope there could be labor peace at Tierra del Sol in the coming years, and that they could eventually sign for something better for the workers, "because I think that the investors aren't just millionaires, they're billionaires. So, they are serious people, people that own hotels and that are going to create another one. They seem to have serious intentions in investing in this country. Let's hope everything goes well." De Cuba finalized.

New owner of Tierra del Sol

As it has been known since the beginning of the new year, Tierra del Sol was sold to a tourist company called Iberostar Group, which is a company that categorizes themselves as a leader in the world of tourism. They own more than 100 4/5-star hotels in 16 countries with about 5.6 million clients. Iberostar Group is a Spanish family-owned company that has been specializing in the tourist sector for more than 60 years. Their origin starts in the shoe industry in 1877. After 1956, they entered in the tourist sector with the purchase of Viajes Iberia, and they started creating alliances with tour prestige tour companies in Europe, Merca of Canada. In 1983, the trade name Iberostar was born, with 7 hotels in Mallorca, Spain. In 2017, they launched a movement to protect the oceans called "Wave of Change", with which they aim to contribute to the 14 goals of the SDGs in order to conserve and utilize oceans, beaches and marine resources in a sustainable way. It is for this reason that they take advantage of the potential that the tourist industry has to construct a rentable and responsible model for tourism in order to protect oceans and reduce climate change. □



Papillon: the butterfly effect of magnificent food



PALM BEACH — Do you remember the film “Papillon” starring Steve McQueen? Papillon restaurant is the island’s example where ‘life imitates art.’ The décor, especially the restrooms, was inspired by the movie. For more than a decade this restaurant has built a reputation with the fusion of classic French cuisine, Dutch and Caribbean flavors. Welcome in the world of wonders where ambience, taste and service come together and you feel you are being welcomed in the home of the owner and her team.

“We find it really important that our guests have fun; can relax while listening to live music while their taste buds are being tickled by France, The Netherlands and the Caribbean. We offer a unique fusion of dishes and a night not

to forget,” says owner Tina. She points out that all Covid-protocol is in place here, they are very keen on hygiene and offer outside dining on a cozy, elegant terrace with social distancing in place and right on the high-rise strip.

Fresh oysters, caviar and wild boar

You are on vacation, life is to enjoy! If you want something special, a different flow than the usual then Papillon is the place to go. Foodies are in heaven here with classic French dishes such as Foie Gras, Frog Legs, fresh Oysters coming in on a weekly basis from Holland, Escargots, Dover Sole à la Meunière flown in from Europe and filleted at the table, Duck Breast seared on the skin, roasted and braised Lamb in Balashi beer and slow braised Wild Boar Shank. Do not leave without trying the exclusive recommendation: Caviar! All of this combined with an extensive wine list from around the world makes Papillon a must-do on your Aruban vacation.



Let the music play!

We will give you another reason to visit: on Monday's and Friday's the famous Marisela who enchants you with her acoustic performance accompanied by percussion only; on Thursday's and Saturday's you can enjoy the tunes of live sax player Jairo and on Sunday's and Tuesday's Jose Herrera will enchants you with his keyboard talent. The musicians interact with the guests, requests can be send in, the live tunes definitely add to the experience.

Vegetarian vibes present

Impressive vegetarian/vegan dishes are set up especially for the guests by the chef and Meredith from Vegan Aruba. “We offer vegan choices that are really good and tasty. Our daily soup is always vegan too.” What are you waiting for, make sure to pay a visit to this elegant yet laid-back restaurant while on Aruba. You are most welcome!

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Quality Care Institute is now a reality

ORANJESTAD – On Tuesday, February 7, 2023, the inauguration of the Quality Care Institute took place. For this occasion, the Prime Minister, Mrs. Evelyn Wever-Croes, and the Minister of Tourism and Public Health, Mr. Dangui Oduber, addressed the guests and healthcare stakeholders in a brief speech.

This institute is essential for the efficiency and effectiveness of healthcare in Aruba. It is part of the trajectory of the Landspakket

Zorg known as F3. Since May 2020, the Government of Aruba made various agreements with the Government of the Netherlands concerning healthcare in Aruba. It is part of the conditions set for the loans provided by the Netherlands to overcome the pandemic. The institute's objective is to improve healthcare quality in Aruba and offer more efficiency and results for the community of Aruba. Quality control is the first objective of this institute. Other goals are to improve

coordination, communication, and agreements for healthcare. It is essential to emphasize that this is in cooperation with all the Kingdom partners to have equality and quality healthcare on the same level as all the other partners in the Dutch Kingdom. The institute has different objectives, namely the healthcare market supervision and new developments. They will also focus on regulating various tariffs and on the results of this regulation. The institute



will guide these decisions based on different experts with relevant experience. One of the most significant achievements is the registration of our natives as medical doctors in Aruba through the AruBIG, which also resorts under this institute.

Minister Oduber stated that all the partners in the Kingdom are excited to work

and cooperate with Aruba to achieve protocols and beneficial quality care for the community. Aruba is reaching its goal of having more efficient, effective, and sustainable healthcare. The Government is grateful to all stakeholders who made this accomplishment a reality in Aruba and the partners in the Dutch Kingdom. □

The DVG is ready to enforce the National Ordinance Restriction Tobacco Products law

ORANJESTAD - Since the unanimous approval by the Parliament in 2021 of the National Ordinance Restriction Tobacco Products, work has started to be able to enforce this accordingly.

A total of 8 public employees of the Department of Goods Inspection and Hygiene of the Department of Public Health (DVG), completed the course and were sworn in as Special Investigation Officers (BOA). It gives these public employees the authority to supervise and enforce the law and regulations of the National Ordinance Restriction Tobacco Products. These officers can investigate for infractions and eventually write reports or fines.

The DVG is currently working on a process necessary for businesses to request an exemption. Once in place,

they will disclose this to the commercial sector.

In the upcoming days, they will be informing the community and commerce about some aspects of the law:

It is not allowed to sell Cigarettes and/or tobacco-containing products to anyone under the age of 21.

Individual cigarette sale is not permitted. Merchants can only sell complete, wrapped, and sealed cigarette packets.

Smoking in public places is not permitted unless the establishment has a permit for a designated smoking area.

Employer is responsible for protecting their employees safe from cigarette/tobacco smoke during working hours and on the employer's premises.

Minors are not allowed to work in an establishment

where they sell tobacco products. In a market, the minor may not work in the area designated for tobacco/cigarette sales.

It is prohibited to give away free tobacco products.

Smoking in private vehicles is not permitted when minors are present.

Smoking on public transportation is prohibited

The sale or gift of cigarettes is not permitted in:

Government entities;
Medical facilities;
Cultural and art facilities;
Sports facilities;
Education institutions.

For more information, like the Directie Volksgezondheid DVG Aruba on Facebook, follow DVG on Instagram [directie_volksgezondheid_aruba](https://www.instagram.com/directie_volksgezondheid_aruba), or visit the website www.dvg.aw, call 5224200 or send an email to servicio@dvg.aw. □

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Travellers' Choice 2020

Don't forget to visit Aruba's famous Red Anchor

At the south east coast of the island, standing alone on a windswept and barren land stands a popular Aruba landmark – a large anchor. It overlooks the sea just beyond, watching over the shipping lanes. It stands there in memory and in honor of all seamen who have lost their life at sea.

Where to Find the Anchor?

The anchor is a “must see” landmark when you visit Aruba. It is among the most photographed historical landmarks for the island. You want to make sure you add this stop on your itinerary when your visiting the south coast of Aruba. The bright red anchor against the backdrop of the deep blue Caribbean sea and the azure blue skies, make a great backdrop for your vacation pictures.

The anchor is located at the entrance to Gate 6 to the former Lago Colony. It is on the outskirts of Seroe Colorado, on the south east point of the island at the “T” junction to Baby Beach.

Depending on where you are staying on the island, follow the signs that

indicate the way to Baby Beach. Once you reach the T-junction, it will be right in front of you.

About the Anchor Size

It will be hard to miss the anchor, it's huge! The anchor that weighs 21,772 kilos, is approximately 10 feet 6 inches wide and 15 feet, 6 inches tall.

On the anchor there are some numbers. The 4112 and 4115, which are believed to be the serial numbers that refer to the “fluke” or horizontal and vertical parts of the anchor, respectively. The number 21772K refers to the weight of the anchor in kilos.

This type of anchor was manufactured by Hoesch Dortmund Horde, at a foundry located in Germany.

Where did the Anchor Come From?

There are a number of stories as to the origins of the anchor, which one do you think it was? (Unfortunately the mystery has never been solved, so your imagination can pick which one you think it might be!)

Story 1:

“According to Mr. Manuel M. Curiel, an ex-

Lago Tug Captain, a fully laden VLCC (Very Large Crude Carrier) was seeking a mooring at the 15-mile anchorage, known as Bara, on the southern part of the island. This is the usual shallow mooring location for ships awaiting orders, etc. The weather was rough with strong current. The normal procedure is that they would walk out three shackles (about 90 feet) until the anchor touches the bottom while the chain must rest on the bottom. Subsequently, they will walk out some extra shackles and when the ship starts to swing or lean on one side, the anchor is properly set. Because of the rough weather, unfortunately they did not get the time to walk out the extra tackles and because of the tension exerted on the winch, it broke, and they lost the anchor and its chain.”

Story 2:

“Mr. Curiel also said that at one time a small tanker with a Korean crew, while lifting their anchor also lifted another anchor near the inner harbor. When the ship asked for assistance, he went with his tugboat along with a barge, to help. But

eventually they had to cut the chain and let the anchor go to the bottom because they could not untangle them.”

How Did The Anchor Become a Landmark?

Sometime between 1980 and 1985, three gentlemen (Mr. Wim Martinus – the Harbormaster of Aruba; Mr. August Genser – the ex-Division Superintendent of Lago's Laboratory; and Mr. Willie Davis – Owner of Filtec at Zeewijk in San Nicolas), were having a conversation with Mr. Charlie Brouns Jr. at his famous Charlie's Bar and Restaurant in San Nicolas. Charlie, who was a visionary and had dreams for developing the San Nicolas area, told these gentlemen that he would like to come up with something innovative for the San Nicolas area to draw tourism to the area.

The “anchor”, which at that time was being stored at the Oranjestad harbor, was suggested as an option. Charlie liked the idea! He then contacted the President of Lago for permission to acquire the anchor. He was granted permission and the anchor was then relocated to its present

location and dedicated “To All Seamen” on the occasion of the closing of the Lago Oil Refinery on March 31, 1985.

Through the Years

Through the years the Anchor was slowly weathering from the wind and salt. As time passed, sadly the origin and purpose of the anchor slowly faded away from people's memories.

After Charles Brouns Jr died on September 15, 2004, his friend Mr. Sam Speziale, requested assistance from the management of Valero Aruba Refinery to help maintain the monument. The Valero Aruba Refinery, graciously sandblasted and painted the anchor and poured a concrete pad around it. On April 17, 2005, the anchor monument was rededicated “To All Seamen” in a formal ceremony in memory of Charles Brouns Jr.

Today, the anchor stands both as memorial to all seaman who have lost their lives at sea, but also as a silent reminder that Seroe Colorado is part of San Nicolas and that San Nicolas is still a vibrant and important part of the island of Aruba.



The Best Time to Visit

When your planning your visit to the south end of the island, you will want to include in your itinerary the many things to see and do there. The anchor will be just one of these stops, (keep an eye out for our future editions, we publish our recommendations!).

With that being said, I have to say, if you enjoy catching a sunrise, the anchor is one of the best places on the island to catch the sunrise. But in reality, anytime is a good time to visit, depending on your personal schedule.☐



Chef Ever de Peña:
"I love to tell stories through my cooking"

Ever de Peña, a professional chef who is only 36 years old, is preparing to open his own restaurant soon. After a long trajectory, different experiences and competitions, Ever is ready to tell a story through his cooking. In an interview with Bon Dia Aruba, Ever shared how he found his passion for cooking and how he came to the decision to have his own restaurant.

Ever shared how he started his studies at the EPB secondary school. Afterwards, he graduated to the EPI University and he always stayed working in hospitality and tourism. He finished university with an Associate Degree in three years, during which he worked and went to school. He worked at the Calypso restaurant at the Casa Del Mar hotel. After Casa Del Mar, Ever started a new job at the Renaissance Hotel.

Ever graduated top of his class. Afterwards, he stayed at the university and followed another course called EAI, which is a level higher.

He further shared that after his time at the Renaissance hotel, he worked at Cooks Restaurant downtown. While he was working there, he was also studying abroad, in places like California and even Italy.

During his time at Cooks Restaurant, Ever joined in a culinary competition at EPI and won. After he graduated from the university a second time, he went to work at the Manchebo Hotel, where he started out as a Sous Chef. After two years, he was promoted to Executive Chef, the

youngest one on the island.

In 2016, Ever competed for the title of Iron Chef in Aruba, going up against other chefs from Marriott and Ritz Carlton hotels. It was during this competition that he formed a friendship with the Executive Chef of Marriott, who offered him the job of Executive Sous Chef. It was with this offer that Ever left Manchebo and started working at Marriott that same year.

"The good thing about Marriott is that every year I would travel twice a year, and we would also bring foreign chefs in our kitchen. While I was working at Manchebo, I also traveled a few times to represent the hotel," he said.

Four years ago, Ever's ex-boss left Marriott and opened his own restaurant. Two years ago he offered Ever the opportunity to open another one with him: "I kept thinking about it and I think that now is the time to do it. That's what I'm working on right now, actually."

Ever shared that he did not always have a passion for cooking. His love grew throughout the years he experienced what it was like to be a chef: "I remember when I was at EPI and I told my mentor that I just wanted my diploma, so that I could live in another country and be a hotel manager. But when I started working as a chef, I just fell in love with it. One thing led to another and I don't think there's anything I love more than cooking now," he expressed.

He noted that even though he does not have a favorite dish, he loves working with seafood,

fish especially, than anything else: "I think fish is so versatile compared to beef. I don't have any specific favorites, but I love cooking with quality ingredients to get the best flavors out of them," he said.

In terms of his experiences competing, Ever shared that he loved it, and that he is disappointed that there has not been another cooking competition in Aruba for more than five years now.

"I think it's a great thing to do as a chef, and as a student, you learn a lot. The culinary world can be very stressful and I think a competition can help you calm down. I competed four times and I always had a blast, not because I won, but the overall experience was great."

In terms of his restaurant that is opening soon, Ever shared that it would be a small place, with room for 24 people, plus an extra 16 at the bar. He explained that the reason behind the limited seating is so he could tell a story through his cooking: "I think with this concept, I can make 16 people happy all night. It's a space where I can express myself through the food," he added.

Lastly, Ever wants to send a message for the Aruban community, especially the younger generation who are still looking for their passion in life: "My message is that it doesn't matter what you end up doing, do it with passion. I remember my mother telling me that it doesn't matter if I end up picking up trash, or whatever, just do it like you love it. That's my advice." □

CROSSWORD

By THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Cellist down
- 6 Steel rod in concrete
- 11 Dined at home
- 12 "Skyfall" singer
- 13 First odd prime
- 14 Radials, e.g.
- 15 Singer Waits
- 16 Try
- 18 Aussie bird
- 19 Rap's — Nas X
- 20 High times
- 21 Cincinnati team
- 23 Salon request
- 25 Phone download
- 27 1949 film noir classic
- 28 Takes to the sky
- 30 Capital on a fjord
- 33 Decimal base
- 34 Alias letters
- 36 Crone
- 37 Mono-gram unit
- 39 Owned by us

- 40 Ties
- 41 Baseball manager Joe
- 43 Bert's buddy
- 44 Nay voters
- 45 Grating sounds
- 46 Valentine's gift

DOWN

- 1 Glib talk
- 2 Not out
- 3 Bulbs for cooks
- 4 Fiction
- 5 "Love Story" actor
- 6 Upset

A	L	E	C		S	T	R	I	P
R	I	C	A		C	H	O	I	C
A	M	O	R		R	A	N	G	E
B	O	N	A	F	I	D	E		
				F	R	E	E	R	I
S	P	R	E	E	S		S	I	R
C	O	A	S	T		C	O	L	O
A	G	T			G	O	N	E	R
R	O	A	D	S	I	D	E		
			Y	U	L	E	T	I	D
P	A	L	L	I	D		I	D	E
U	B	O	A	T	S		M	O	A
B	E	A	N	S			E	L	L

Yesterday's answer

- 7 TV's Falco
- 8 Summer wear
- 9 City of Syria
- 10 Takes a breather
- 17 Pewter component
- 22 Massage setting
- 24 Court
- 26 Com-mends
- 28 Lady of Spain
- 29 Reggae forerunner
- 31 Hugh of "House"
- 32 Fiona, for one
- 33 Oven feature
- 35 Church sight
- 38 Stumble
- 42 Lennon's love

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
11						12			
13						14			
15				16	17				
18				19			20		
21			22		23	24			
		25		26		27			
	28				29	30		31	32
33				34		35	36		
37			38				39		
40						41	42		
43						44			
45						46			

2-10

A X Y D L B A A X R
I S L O N G F E L L O W

One letter stands for another. In this sample, A is used for the three L's. X for the two O's, etc. Single letters, apostrophes, the length and formation of the words are all hints. Each day the code letters are different.

2-10

CRYPTOQUOTE

O G X T H Q X R X W N Q X Z R Z M

N K O G X H U T M T H Q X R X L X X J .

— X T D X A O G F D D Z A E

Yesterday's Cryptoquote: IF YOU DO NOT LOVE ME I SHALL NOT BE LOVED! IF I DO NOT LOVE YOU I SHALL NOT LOVE. SAMUEL BECKETT



Microsoft employee Alex Buscher demonstrates a search feature integration of Microsoft Bing search engine and Edge browser with OpenAI on Tuesday, Feb. 7, 2023, in Redmond.

Associated Press

AI search engines can now chat with us, but glitches abound

By MATT O'BRIEN

AP Technology Writer

REDMOND, Wash. (AP) —

Nearly a quarter-century after Google's search engine began to reshape how we use the internet, big tech companies are racing to revamp a familiar web tool into a gateway to a new form of artificial intelligence.

If it seems like this week's newly announced AI search chatbots Google's Bard, Baidu's Ernie Bot and Microsoft's Bing chatbot are coming out of nowhere, well, even some of their makers seem to think so.

The spark rushing them to market was the popularity of ChatGPT, launched late last year by Microsoft's partner OpenAI and now helping to power a new version of the Bing search engine.

First out of the gate among big tech companies with a publicly accessible search

chatbot, Microsoft executives said this week they had been hard at work on the project since last summer. But the excitement around ChatGPT brought new urgency.

"The reception to ChatGPT and how that took off, that was certainly a surprise," said Yusuf Medhi, the executive leading Microsoft's consumer division, in an interview. "How rapidly it went mainstream, where everybody's talking about it, like, in every meeting. That did surprise me."

HOW'S THIS DIFFERENT FROM CHATGPT?

Millions of people have now tried ChatGPT, using it to write silly poems and songs, compose letters, recipes and marketing campaigns or help write schoolwork. Trained on a huge trove of online writings, from instruction manuals to digitized books, it has a strong command of human language and gram-

mar. But what the newest crop of search chatbots promise that ChatGPT doesn't have is the immediacy of what can be found in a web search. Ask the preview version of the new Bing for the latest news or just what people are talking about on Twitter and it summarizes a selection of the day's top stories or trends, with footnotes linking to media outlets or other data sources.

ARE THEY ACCURATE?

Frequently not, and that's a problem for internet searches. Google's hasty unveiling of its Bard chatbot this week started with an embarrassing error first pointed out by Reuters about NASA's James Webb Space Telescope. But Google's is not the only AI language model spitting out falsehoods.

The Associated Press asked Bing on Wednesday for the most important thing to happen in sports over the past 24 hours with the expectation it might say something about basketball star LeBron James passing Kareem Abdul-Jabbar's career scoring record. Instead, it confidently spouted a false but detailed account of the upcoming Super Bowl days before it's actually scheduled to happen. □

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California bill would protect native western Joshua tree



A Joshua tree is silhouetted against the sky at Joshua Tree National Park in California on May 19, 2020.

By SOPHIE AUSTIN

Associated Press/Report for America

SACRAMENTO, Calif. (AP)

— The western Joshua tree won't be listed as threatened — yet — as California's Fish and Game Commission again delayed a decision Wednesday after a bill was proposed to provide protections to the native desert plant.

The proposed legislation, the Western Joshua Tree Conservation Act, was made public late Tuesday. Backed by Democratic Gov. Gavin Newsom's administration, it would prohibit anyone from importing, exporting or removing the tree without a permit from the state. It would also require the state to work with Native American tribes to draft a conservation plan for the tree by 2024.

"The western Joshua tree is iconic," California Department of Fish and Wildlife Di-

rector Chuck Bonham said Wednesday. "It deserves special consideration through its own law."

Bonham said the legislation would mandate protections for the tree while also simplifying the permit process for getting permission to remove it.

The bill states that "there is a critical need to immediately conserve the species while also ensuring timely and efficient permitting mechanisms for activities within its range."

The proposal comes after the Fish and Game Commission, an agency that sets regulations for the Department of Fish and Wildlife to implement, has spent months deliberating on whether to list the tree as threatened under the California Endangered Species Act after advancing a petition on the issue in 2020.

The Center for Biological Diversity, which filed the peti-

tion in 2019, says it needs to be protected from threats driven by climate change. While the center is pleased Newsom's administration is taking up this issue with the proposed legislation, Brendan Cummings, the group's conservation director, still wants to see the tree listed as threatened. Cummings said the western Joshua tree is different from species already listed as threatened under the California Endangered Species Act because it still exists in large numbers. Despite this, he said "there's a whole body of peer-reviewed published science" that show the threats climate change poses to the species.

"We just need to ensure that we're protecting the right places long term and doing, probably, active management to help the species get through the very difficult decades ahead," Cummings said.

The California Endangered Species Act, a decades-

old law aimed at conserving plants and animals at risk of extinction, protects about 250 species listed as threatened. Species under consideration to be listed also receive protections. The Fish and Game Commission voted unanimously Wednesday to postpone its decision, allowing for the tree to remain protected in the meantime, so it cannot be removed without permission from the Department of Fish and Wildlife. □



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1 Bed Ocean View \$12,000

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Relacional Tel. 583 5400

Centre for Diabetes
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Quota Club Tel. 525 2672

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Review: Magic Mike bids farewell with a 'Last Dance'

By **LINDSEY BAHR**
AP Film Writer

The words Magic Mike may conjure up images of sweaty, sculpted, undulating men, dancing unthreateningly for hordes of screaming women, but there has always been a backdrop of brutal economic reality looming over the fantasy world.

The unlikely franchise has explored the escalating devaluation of physical laborers, the suffocating effects of the college industrial complex, predatory loan businesses, recession and even COVID-19, which has effectively destroyed poor Mike Lane's furniture business in this latest film.

When we re-meet Channing Tatum's gentle hunk in "Magic Mike's Last Dance," in theaters Friday, he's bartending at parties for the very rich in Miami. The gig could be worse, but though he doesn't quite say it, the implication is that he's even aged out of dancing now. He has to seriously think about it when his wealthy employer offers him \$6,000 for a dance later that evening.

Asking why sequels exist doesn't usually produce satisfying answers, but "Magic Mike's Last Dance" is a film that was born backwards, a fit of inspiration



This image released by Warner Bros. Pictures shows Salma Hayek, left, and Channing Tatum in a scene from "Magic Mike's Last Dance."

Associated Press

from Steven Soderbergh after seeing what Tatum had done with Magic Mike Live. The Las Vegas stage show, inspired by the first two movies, is described on its website as "an unforgettably fun night of sizzling, 360-degree entertainment," "hot," "hilarious," "the great time you've been looking for" and "the ultimate girl's night out." But "Magic Mike's Last Dance" is not quite any of those things and perhaps might even annoy some of its most enthusiastic fans the ones who simply want to holler at the six-packs in front of them. Because this film is that thing that many

sequels promise but don't deliver on: It's both a true evolution and a conclusion.

It's also part fantasy, part bleak reality, part commentary the fundamental value of dance and what's lost in a society that has forgotten how. It is not, in other words, simply another striptease.

"Magic Mike" and "XXL" (directed by Gregory Jacobs) both latched on to a kind of pure joy in the spectacle of the male stripper. But that audience, by nature of its venues, is inherently limited and "down market." In "Last Dance," Soderbergh gives Mike a

wealthy benefactor, in the form of the operatically named Maxandra Mendoza (Salma Hayek) who is in the midst of a messy divorce from an obscenely successful media mogul and looking to shake things up.

After an acrobatic, but fully clothed, encounter with Mike, she decides to whisk him away to London, dress him up and put him in charge of staging a show that promises to make its audiences feel the way she did the night she met Mike. In the process, she, and Soderbergh, Tatum and screenwriter Reid Carolin, set a historic London the-

ater, and all of its fussy rules, ablaze (figuratively). If only all scorned socialites could do something so charitable with their rage.

It's a clever conceit for a filmmaker who never tires of singeing the establishment he continues work in. And like many Soderbergh films, "Magic Mike's Last Dance," shaggy, earnest and innocently tawdry, goes down so easy that it's almost impossible to appreciate it fully on a first watch. I imagine it will only improve with more.

If there is a quibble, it's that Hayek and Tatum don't quite inspire the will-they-won't-they tension that the movie seems to be asking of them.

They work well together when they're working together, but the romantic chemistry is a bit lacking. Besides, his great unrequited love isn't a person but his furniture business, right? It doesn't help that Maxandra is also an extremely underdeveloped character.

This story is told like a fairy tale, or a poetically composed school paper from a particularly precocious student, with a silky voiced young narrator telling us about Mike's woes and the waning significance of dance in the culture. □

At Super Bowl, Sheryl Lee Ralph seeks to 'Lift Every Voice'

By **JONATHAN LANDRUM Jr.**
AP Entertainment Writer

PHOENIX (AP) — Sheryl Lee Ralph is living a career dream: The "Abbott Elementary" star won her first Emmy last year and will lend her powerful vocals as a Super Bowl pregame performer this weekend.

With all her success, the veteran actor-singer only wishes her late parents were living to witness her recent accomplishments.

"I wish that my parents were still alive to see it and experience it with me," Ralph said in a recent interview while promoting the Microban 24 sanitizing spray. Her father was a college professor, while her mother

was a renowned Jamaican fashion designer.

"My parents always believed in me and my success," she continued. "I know this would've been something they would love to have been a part of. I do miss them.

Ralph will hit this Sunday's Super Bowl stage to sing "Lift Every Voice and Sing." The other pregame performances include country music star Chris Stapleton, who will sing the national anthem, while R&B legend Babyface will perform "America the Beautiful." Rihanna is the featured halftime performer.

Last year, the 66-year-old Ralph won an Emmy as a

first-time nominee for best supporting actress in a comedy for her role as Barbara Howard on ABC's "Abbott Elementary," which also stars Quinta Brunson. In her acceptance speech, she belled powerful lyrics about being an "Endangered Species" by Dianne Reeves to implore others to never give up on their dreams or aspirations. Ralph said she always believed in her abilities. She's happy to finally receive the positive recognition and energy being served her way.

"Fame and success can be very daunting," said the actor who has decades of industry experience with

several memorable roles including the Broadway musical "Dreamgirls" in the

1980s and the stepmother to the title character on the 1990s sitcom "Moesha." □



Sheryl Lee Ralph arrives at AARP's 21st annual Movies for Grownups Awards on Saturday, Jan. 28, 2023, at the Beverly Wilshire, A Four Seasons Hotel in Beverly Hills, Calif.

Associated Press

Suit: NFL runs 'sham' disability program for injured players

By MARYCLAIRE DALE

Associated Press

Ten retired NFL players are accusing the league of lies, bad faith and flagrant violations of federal law in denying disability benefits in a potential class-action lawsuit filed Thursday in Baltimore.

The men said they left the game with lingering physical or cognitive injuries that make their daily lives difficult if not excruciating. They also said they are not alone.

"They're a small fraction of the players who have been wronged by the NFL's disability plan.

These former players deserve far more from an organization worth billions of dollars than a sham process in which there's no chance of success," said lawyer Chris Seeger, who separately has been class counsel in the \$1 billion settlement of NFL concussion claims.

The new lawsuit was filed in federal court in Baltimore, and names as defendants both NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell and the NFL's Disability Board.

The suit comes as league officials gather in Phoenix



This combo of file photos, shows former 9 of the 10 retired NFL football players, who have accused the league of lies, bad faith and flagrant violations of federal law in denying disability benefits in a potential class action lawsuit filed Thursday, Feb. 9, 2023, in Baltimore.

Associated Press

for the Super Bowl on Sunday.

The NFL did not immediately respond to a request for comment, nor did the NFL Players Association.

Willis McGahee, a first-round pick in 2003 who spent 11 seasons in the NFL, said he has had more than a dozen surgeries for football injuries and often needs help getting out of bed. He is 41.

and I'm bleeding, there are holes in the wall. My wife and kids are crying," Smith,

39, said on a videoconference call that included McGahee and lawyers. "I went down a dark path. If I ever hurt one of them, in one of these cases, that's probably the end. Like, I'm done."

The lawsuit also alleges that the doctors who examine players for the league's disability plan have a financial interest in denying the claims, as it makes them more likely to get future referrals from the program. One neuropsychologist

who was paid more than \$800,000 from the program examined a group of 29 former players and found none of them was disabled, according to the lawyers. Seeger, who has worked closely with NFL lawyers on the concussion case for a decade, said the latest suit seeks to have the disability plan "fulfill its overdue legal responsibilities to players rather than continue to try to dodge accountability every step of the way."

A successful claim can

lead to payments between \$65,000 to \$265,000, but only 30 of the thousands filed to date have led to top awards, according to Sam Katz, one of several lawyers working with Seeger on the case.

The disability program grew out of the 2011 collective-bargaining agreement between the players and the union, and was hailed a way to help ailing former players. During the pandemic, players complained of delays in having their cases reviewed.

"I had a great run.

My name has been out there. But I feel like it's time to step up (for other players)," said Smith, who noted he had twice been knocked out during televised games. "We deserve to be taken care of at the end of the day."

The other former players who signed on to the lawsuit are Jason Alford (three seasons), Daniel Loper (five seasons), Michael McKenzie (11 seasons), Jamize Olaware (eight seasons), Alex Parsons (one season), Charles Sims (four seasons), Joey Thomas (three seasons) and Lance Zeno (two seasons). □

Native Americans renew protests of Kansas City Chiefs mascot

By TERRY TANG

Associated Press

PHOENIX (AP) — Two years ago as the Kansas City Chiefs were vying for a second consecutive Super Bowl victory in Tampa, Florida, there was one group outside Raymond James Stadium picketing their appearance. Native American protesters were calling for the Chiefs to drop their name, logo and their trademark "war chant" where fans make a chopping-hand gesture mimicking the Native American tomahawk. They even hired a plane to fly around the area. Before game day, there were two online petitions and billboards of protest erected in Kansas City. Now as the Chiefs return to Super Bowl Sunday

for the first time in two years in Arizona, protesters will be there again. Arizona to Rally Against Native Mascots is planning to demonstrate outside State Farm Stadium in the Phoenix suburb of Glendale. They will be joined at a news conference Thursday afternoon in Phoenix by members of Kansas City Native advocacy groups.

Fights against appropriation of tribal cultures and images have been going on for decades not just with the Chiefs but with multiple teams across different sports. Native Americans say using iconography and words with Native connotations demeans them and perpetuates racist stereotypes. Supporters have felt more embold-

ened in the last few years. A lot of teams previously countered that the mascots were meant to show tribes respect. But the racial reckoning and protests of 2020 after the murder of George Floyd compelled some franchises to do some soul-searching. The Cleveland Indians baseball team officially changed to the Guardians in November 2021. They also axed Chief Wahoo, a logo which was a caricature of an Indian American. It was a year ago this month that the Washington Football Team was anointed the Commanders. That move came after 18 months of pressure to drop the Redskins, which was seen as a racial slur. The Chiefs have made efforts to address concerns

about cultural insensitivities going back a decade but always stop short of altering their name or fan-favorite gestures and chants. In 2013, the team began dis-

cussions with the American Indian Community Working Group. This led to invitations for Cheyenne spiritual and ceremonial leaders to take part at some games. □



A woman wearing Native American clothing attends a "No Honor in Racism Rally" march in front of TCF Bank Stadium before an NFL football game between the Minnesota Vikings and the Kansas City Chiefs, Oct. 18, 2015, in Minneapolis.

Associated Press

Irving, Durant trades bolster West teams before NBA deadline

By **BRIAN MAHONEY**
AP Basketball Writer

First it was Kyrie Irving to Dallas. Then came Kevin Durant to Phoenix. The breakup in Brooklyn is rebuilding some contenders in the West.

Trade deadline day in the NBA arrived Thursday with news of a blockbuster. The Nets had agreed overnight to deal Durant to the Suns for a package that included Mikal Bridges, Cam Johnson, Jae Crowder, four first-round picks and additional draft compensation. Another big name was moved a day earlier when the Lakers agreed to send Russell Westbrook to Utah as part of a three-way deal with Utah and Minnesota that brought D'Angelo Russell back to Los Angeles.

"Just like that it's a war in the West!" Sacramento Kings guard Terence Davis II tweeted.

The Lakers added another big man later Thursday when they acquired Mo Bamba from the Orlando Magic for Patrick Beverley, a second-round pick and cash considerations, according to a person with knowledge of those negotiations. The Magic are not expected to keep



Brooklyn Nets guard James Harden (13), forward Kevin Durant (7) and guard Kyrie Irving celebrate during the first half of Game 1 of an NBA basketball first-round playoff series Saturday, May 22, 2021, in New York.

Associated Press

Beverley, said the person, who spoke to AP on condition anonymity because the trade did not yet have league approval.

More moves figure to be made before the 3 p.m. EST deadline, with the Nets perhaps not done reshaping their roster. Those already agreed to were confirmed to AP on condition of anonymity because they were not yet official.

The Suns just got Devin Booker back from a groin

injury that had sidelined him since Christmas and soon will add Durant to the lineup when he recovers from a sprained knee ligament.

Those two, plus Chris Paul and Deandre Ayton, could make this Phoenix team more powerful than the one that won an NBA-best 64 games in the 2021-22 season, but then flamed out with a second-round loss to Dallas.

Phoenix has won nine of 11

and shared the fourth-best record with Dallas entering its game Thursday night in Atlanta.

The Mavericks also may be stronger after acquiring Irving to pair with Luka Doncic. Irving asked out of Brooklyn last week, frustrated with his negotiations for a contract extension, and he was headed West a few days later.

Then it was Durant, who had gone to Brooklyn with Irving in 2019.

"I just love the competition now that we can be in the same conference," Irving said.

A day after LeBron James broke the NBA's career scoring record, the Lakers moved to get him more help by acquiring Russell who began his career with the franchise from Minnesota, and guard Malik Beasley and forward Jarred Vanderbilt from the Jazz. The deal sent Westbrook to Utah after the 2017 NBA MVP never thrived alongside James and Anthony Davis. The Lakers made another move Thursday, sending center Thomas Bryant to Denver for Davon Reed and three second-round picks. San Antonio added more assets to its rebuilding protect by trading center Jakob Poeltl back to the Toronto Raptors for Khem Birch and a first-round pick in the 2024 draft and a pair of second-round selections. Poeltl was one of the most-wanted centers on the market in this trade season. He's averaged 12.1 points and a team-high 9.0 rebounds for the Spurs, who acquired Poeltl from the Raptors as part of the Kawhi Leonard-DeMar DeRozan trade in 2018. □

Authorities seek 6-year doping ban for NCAA sprint champion

By **EDDIE PELLIS**
AP National Writer

Anti-doping authorities are seeking a six-year ban against four-time NCAA champion Divine Oduduru of Nigeria, whose alleged cheating was uncovered in the first case brought by U.S. authorities under a sweeping law designed to combat widespread doping schemes across the globe.

The Athletics Integrity Unit, which oversees anti-doping in global track, announced Thursday that the 26-year-old sprinter, who ran for Texas Tech, has been provisionally suspended for possession and use or attempted use of multiple prohibited sub-

stances. Oduduru did not immediately respond to messages left on his social media accounts by The Associated Press.



Divine Oduduru, of Nigeria, walks from the track after he was disqualified for a false start in his heat of the men's 100-meters at the 2020 Summer Olympics, on July 31, 2021, in Tokyo.

Associated Press

The AIU said Oduduru was the sprinter labeled "Athlete 2" in a complaint against "naturopathic" therapist Eric Lira, who is

alleged to have supplied performance-enhancing drugs to athletes before the Summer Olympics in 2021.

"Athlete 1" has already been identified as Nigeria's Blessing Okagbare, who is serving an 11-year ban.

Federal investigators used hundreds of texts between Okagbare, Lira and others as evidence to charge the therapist, who was based in El Paso, Texas. They said Lira distributed drugs, including human growth hormone and the blood-building hormone erythropoietin "for the purpose of corrupting" the Tokyo Olympics.

They charged Lira under

the Rodchenkov Act, a law named after Grigory Rodchenkov, the former Moscow anti-doping lab director who blew the whistle on Russia's scheme to help athletes get away with cheating in advance of the 2014 Olympics in Sochi.

The Rodchenkov Act is not designed to go after individual athletes, but evidence collected in wider probes can then be used by anti-doping authorities to seek out violations.

Oduduru swept the 100 and 200-meter sprints at NCAA championships in 2019. He won the 200 meters in 2018 and the 200 at NCAA indoor championships the same year. □